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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000752

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S TIES TO IRAN DEEPENING; EARLY STAGES OF A PERSIAN AXIS?

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1B. 2007 DUSHANBE 1724

Classified By: Ambassador Tracey A. Jacobson; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Since President Rahmon's February 2008 trip to Tehran (reftel A), media reports have highlighted the deepening relationship between Iran and Tajikistan, spawning discussion of an emerging "Persian axis" which would include Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. The fact that the Tajik government is secular, fears Islamic extremism and is drawn to Iran largely out of economic necessity (reftel B) will hinder the development of this axis. End Summary.

Diplomatic Charm

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12. (U) Recent statements by high ranking Tajik and Iranian officials reflect stronger ties between the two countries. In February 2008 Ali Ashgar Sherdoost, Iran's newly appointed ambassador to Tajikistan, told Iran's official news agency that "expansion of cooperation with Tajikistan in the cultural, economic, social and political fields is among the top strategic priorities of Iran's foreign policy." After a March 2008 visit by President Rahmon to Iran, the Chairman of Tajikistan's lower house of parliament, Saydullo Khairulloyev, said he expected an increased amount of cooperation between Iranian and Tajik parliamentarians.

13. (U) Iran and Tajikistan have announced numerous agreements on economic and cultural projects, many of which they will undertake with Afghanistan. On May 27, the Afghan, Tajik and Iranian Deputy Foreign Ministers announced the signing of a tripartite agreement, which outlined a series of joint endeavors, including rail and power projects, a joint investment agency, and a Persian language television channel.

Tajikistan also appears to have stepped up its support for Iran's bid to become a full member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Iran holds observer status in the organization, and in the past, the Tajiks have supported Iran's bid "in principle." In March, the Tajiks said that Iran could become a full member "gradually" (reftel B); that same month, Iran's Foreign Minister announced that "Tajikistan supports us."

A Marriage of Convenience

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15. (U) The conventional wisdom is that Tajikistan is drawn closer to Iran in response to Uzbekistan's closer relationship with Russia, and because Tajikistan is running out of financial benefactors (reftel A). Days after a highly publicized visit by President Karimov to Moscow last winter, in the midst of Tajikistan's power and food crisis, President

Rahmon traveled to Iran. Upon his return, the governments announced several bilateral economic agreements, including additional Iranian investment in Tajik power projects.

¶16. (U) After President Rahmon's February trip to Iran, Tajik media outlets reported heavily on Iran's humanitarian aid contributions to alleviate winter fuel shortages. While the United States was the largest aid donor, Iran was the second largest, and several articles appeared throughout March 2008 about Iran's humanitarian deliveries of fuel oil.

¶17. (C) Political commentators have speculated about the reasons for the closer bilateral relationship. Rashid Abdullo, a political analyst, told a Russian newspaper that "Moscow has expanded ties with new partners to the detriment of its old time strategic allies." Abdullo Rahnamo, an expert at the Strategic Research Center, told us that Tajikistan had been Russia's "best partner" in the area. OTajikistan had been Russia's "best partner" in the area. When Russia switched its focus to Uzbekistan, "Tajikistan was left in a hard situation."

Culture Club

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¶18. (C) Iranian and Tajik cultural exchanges have also increased. Rahnamo told us that Iran's foreign policy, infused with religion, had in the past alienated Tajik leaders. In recent years, Iran has learned to approach Tajikistan instead through emphasizing cultural and linguistic ties. During a March 2008 visit by the Iranian Foreign Minister, President Rahmon said "I expect the learned figures of Iran and Tajikistan to exchange their findings

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about common ground on values and traditions of the two nations on a systematic basis." In addition to talk of a Persian language television station, some Tajik academics have called for using Persian script, instead of Tajik Cyrillic.

¶19. (C) The Tajik government's courting of Iran has led to efforts to downplay the Sunni-Shiite divide. Hoji Mirzo, the well-respected imam of a Friday mosque in Kulyab, told us that he had been called in by State Committee for National Security officials, who instructed him not to criticize Shiism or Iran because "relations between the two countries are good."

Comment: How Deep Is the Love?

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¶10. (C) On the surface, Iran and Tajikistan are growing closer. There are some significant questions, however, about whether the emerging "Persian axis" will have legs. The Tajik government is fundamentally secular, and there are no signs that it will lose its "Islamophbic" nature, which will limit its relations with Iran. The Tajiks are also still very reluctant to work with Afghanistan, especially on border and visa issues. It is not likely that Tajikistan will revert to Persian script any time in the near future, and there are questions about how successful a television channel can be given the differing media restrictions in Tajikistan and Iran. Many of the projects in the tripartite agreement have been announced previously; how many of the projects will be implemented ) and when ) is another matter. The deepening ties with Iran reflect Tajikistan's need for additional benefactors, after having seen its relationship with Russia and the international financial institutions decline. The Tajik-Iranian relationship is, from the Tajik point of view, based more on Iran's deep pockets than on mutual goals and understanding. End comment.

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